Is There Any Hope?
I Peter 1:3-9
December 21, 1969
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Chrsitmas Day dawned. To my joy I saw brilliant blue skies overhead. Already we had one welcome gift, that of glorious weather.

I looked down the hut. It was hardly recognizable. The ground was clean and neatly swept. The bamboo bed slats had been taken out and thoroughly debugged. The walls above the sleeping platforms were garlanded with green boughs - the one note of Christmas cheer the jungle offered in abundance. Men stirred, got up, and began to move about, wishing each other a hearty "Merry Christmas."

For once we ate our breakfast in leisurely, gentlemanly fashion. Then we prepared for church. We wore whatever was our best, although it may have been no more than a clean loincloth.

I went early to church. I wanted to have a few moments of quiet. Someone had made a Christmas wreath of jungle greens. Resting against the ivory-colored bamboo of the Holy Table, it gave a feeling of serenity.

Others had also come for those moments of hallowed quiet. Men entered softly. By fifteen minutes before eleven o'clock, when the service was to begin, the church was full. Some were sitting on the ground, some on bamboo benches, some on home-made stools. But most were standing along the sides and at the back or front, whichever one might like to call it. Over two thousand P.O.W.'s filled the area. But the hush I had felt when I first arrived remained unbroken.

Padre Webb entered and took his place in front of the Holy Table. He prayed in silence, raised his head and announced the first hymn, "O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem." He did not need to say the words and have us repeat them after him. Those who knew them sang them; those who did not picked them up from their neighbor.

Bill Maclean was standing beside me. He was singing bass and in Latin. We had been at St. Andrews University together. While we sang, there came to my mind the going-down service before our last Christmas at home, which students

had attended. I could see the scarlet-robed students and the yellow lights of the lanterns, making a warm Christmas-card picture against the old gray walls of the university chapel.

We sang a second carol, "Noel, Noel." Padre Webb gave a brief sermon. His topic was "The Hope of Christmas." We came to the closing hymn, "Good Christian Men, Rejoice."

While we were singing we heard the almost-forgotten wail of the air-raid siren. It rose, then gradually died away. Far off we could hear the rumble of a plane. We exchanged glances. This could not be Japanese. We kept on singing. In the blue sky over our heads we heard a four-engine bomber flying confidently in the direction of Bangkok. We put all our feeling into that hymn. More lustily than ever we sang "Rejoice!' Indeed we sang so lustily that the prison guards came charging into the church, shouting the Japanese equivalent of "Shut up! They'll hear you."

I had knownof the power of praise. But I was not aware that it could soar ten to fifteen thousand feet and be picked up by a bomber crew above the engine noise.

The padre pronounced the benediction and sent us forth in peace.

We were barely out of the church area when someone slapped me on the back.

"Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas, Ernie old boy!"

It was Bill Maclean, wearing an enormous smile.

"You must have been thinking the same thoughts as myself," I said.

"You mean - that plane was a symbol of hope?"

I changed my pace to keep step with his, and said, "Yes. I wonder if the crew have any idea what they mean to us. Poor blighters. They're no doubt grumpy because they have to fly out of their billet on Christmas Day."

"Probably a U.S.A.F. plane taking photographs. I hope they saw us."

"If they didn't see us," I replied, "perhaps they heard us after all."

The happy looks on the faces of the men walking near us and the loud hum of their conversation as they returned to their huts and their Christmas dinners indicated they were all having the same reaction.

I remarked to Bill, "This is a Merry Christmas - especially when you compare it to last year."

"Last year!" He made a face. "That was a muddy mess. No holiday, no church service, hardly any food. If I remember correctly, you couldn't eat anything anyway."

"Right. I was on a diet of nothing. That was just before I got 'dip' and a few other things. It was almost the end."

Bill looked more serious. "We're not out of the woods yet - not by a long way. But now there's hope. That's the thing - there's hope."

That was a section from a book I am sure many of you have read: Through the Valley of the Kwai by Ernest Gordon. Gordon is now Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. During the Second World War he was a captain in the Scottish Infantry, a prisoner of war after the British collapse in the Far East, and one of the survivors of the Japanese Death Camp made famous by the motion picture, "The Bridge Over the River Kwai."

The book he wrote is a remarkable story of the miraculous transformation that occurred in a group of men who had accepted the fact that for them there was no hope. In the P.O.W. camp British gentlemen became animals. Concern for the welfare of others was non-existent. Men stole food from each other: men slowly dying of malnutrition, diptheria and amoebic dysentery were simply ignored and left to die alone. Civilization, as these men had known it, simply came apart, because there was no hope at all. The death rate soared, and because there was no realistic expectation that life in the immediate future would have any significance - in fact, that there would be a future - men lost whatever it is that distinguishes them from animals.

The theological premise on which Gordon's very fine novel is built, is that Hope is an absolute necessity for the survival of human life. That's an important premise - a relevant idea as we reflect on the meaning of Christmas in this year 1969.

To return to the story, the miracle of hope happened in the Valley of the Kwai. Slowly, gradually, quietly, something new began to occur. For Ernest Gordon, it was the compassionate concern of an enlisted man who volunteered to stay with him as he approached death. But instead of dying as he should, Gordon lived. And throughout the camp individual expression of humanness, and kindness gave birth to that which had been dead: namely Hope. Gradually order was restored: medical services were organized: gardens were planted to grow plants which would produce healing drugs and vitamins. Later, classes were taught, an orchestra formed - and a church. For Ernest Gordon, and many of his companions, it was a spiritual pilgrimage through the valley of dispair to the mountain top of Hope. And it happened because he, and others, came to understand a concept of God that includes his presence wherever we are in the now; and his beckoning presence in the future - wherever that may turn out to be. That is, because the future includes God, the present moment is significant. Because Hope is built into the fundamental nature of things, life now is abundantly worth the living and the trying and the risking and the dying.

In many ways we live in a situation which is remarkably similar to that Japanese Prisoner of War Camp. To be sure, none of us here today will be executed, or die of diptheria before the sun sets. And yet we do live in a time when the lack of hope is causing civilization to come apart at the seams. As I read several accounts last week of the events which punctuated the decade of the sixties, this came through loudly and clearly. In ten short years, a people of great hope and promise have turned cynically sour, and have allowed themselves to lose that precious hope.

Item - the Black Panther is what he is because he has given up hope that this culture can ever rid itself of the cancer of racism.

Item - the political radical, the anarchist, is what he is because he has given up hope that this political system can respond to the needs of its people.

Item - the disallusioned college student is what he is because he has given up hope in our integrity.

As this decade comes to a close we are painfully forced to remember that three slain Americans gave millions of people a hope, a dream: that regardless of what

moving out to meet the future, the precise contents of which we can never really know in advance.

And on what basis does one have this hope? Christmas - the coming of Jesus Christ into the world - the living hope of a God who participates in this life with us. That is the shattering goodness of the Gospel. Not just because a baby was born 2,000 years ago, but because the birth of that child signaled the incredibly good news that Almighty God cares about us in this life: that he participates in this life with us: that we, whoever we are, wherever we are, can face our futures hopefully because God will be in them with us.

That makes quite a bit of difference as we face the perplexing days ahead. In Vietnam, in our cities - in the halls of Congress - in the United Nations - on our campuses - have we any reason to believe that the God who invaded the world by way of a rude manger bed will not be there too? He is there - and will be there because of that we may have hope.

It makes quite a bit of difference to us personally, as well. Everyone of us faces an uncertain future. Everyone of us carries a load of problems, concerns, simple things really - but mo umentally significant in the way they influence our daily attitude - our relationships with those we love - our style of life. Well, the incredible hope of Christmas is that God is a partner with me in my life, and with you in yours: that he is going to accompany you and me as we walk into that uncertain future: that his redemptive, creative love is going to be a factor, a power, at work in whatever the future might bring.

That's not starry-eyed naievete -: nor is it a cynical fatalism: that is Hope, grounded in an openness to reality - a confidence that in Jesus Christ we may welcome a thousand tomorrows - because God is with us.

Is thereany Hope? I would rather sing my response -

"Good Christian men, rejoice,
With heart and soul, and voice;
Give ye heed to what we say:
News! News! Jesus Christ is born today." Amen

safe. There can be not true hope that is confined to this life alone. But neither can there be a meaningful hope that has nothing to do with this life.

Thus we come to the hope of Christmas which is eternal in scope, but contemporary in focus. Our New Testament lesson this morning was taken from the first letter of Peter, a brief document written between the years 62 and 64 A.D., immediately prior to the great persecution of Christians initiated by the Roman Emperor Nero in 64. It was written to people who were just awakening to the possibility that their new faith might become a terrible liability. Therefore they faced a two-fold temptation: either to abandon their faith or to become fatalistic - "Que sera, sera" - "It doesn't much matter what happens because we're on our way to heaven." And so Peter wrote - and he talked first about the "new life" given to these people in Jesus Christ - a "new life" which is expressed in a "living hope". That is to say, Peter spoke to these understandably anxious people by assuring them that the grace of God would see them through any suffering they might have to endure, but also by affirming the significance of the lives they were living in the present. "You have an ultimate hope - and you may rest in that. But your hope is also living. Your life is full of significance. What you do now, and tomorrow - matters a great deal."

That is the hope of Christmas, a hope that focuses on the mundane realities of human life - a hope first annunciated to common shepherds - a hope dramatized in a humble birth - the most universal human experience.

The problem is that we have confused the word "hope" with the word "wish". To hope, - for many of us, is merely to superimpose our wishes, our dreams, our aspirations - on the future. Needless to say that is less than what we mean when we talk about "Christian Hope".

One writer has corrected this traditional distortion by pointing out that there is no such thing as a "hope" per se: there are only hopeful people. Hope is an attitude, a way of living, a way of confronting the future. To have hope is not just to expect the future to bring us whatever it is we want. Hope, rather, is an openness to the future; a confidence that the future will be worth living in; a